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ABSTRACT

This ethnographic study was conducted to study students', administrators', and teachers' perceptions of and experiences at a Business Technology and Communications magnet high school in a large urban district that has been under court-ordered desegregation since 1985. Triangulation of data collection included classroom observations over 20 weeks, anecdotal data from student focus groups in which 112 students participated, informal structured conversations with students, individual interviews, autobiographical writings of 68 students, and archival data. Findings generated from this study culminated in developing grounded theory. Data identified a student culture of a lack of empowerment and of oppression, with a deep incompatibility between adults (teachers and administrators) and students. These characteristics frame a grounded theory of a facilitative environment driven by the specific absence of attitudinal qualities that promote student empowerment, respect and recognition. Findings from other studies have also indicated a significantly positive correlation between a high level of facilitative environment and success in learning. (Contains 2 figures and 15 references.) (SLD)

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Critical Ethnography of an Urban High School

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This research is an ethnographic study guided by the purpose of reconstructing students', administrators', and teachers' perceptions of and experiences at a Business Technology and Communications magnet high school. The school is located in a large, urban school district that has been under court-ordered desegregation since 1985. The research questions are:

- What is the meaning of schooling for these high school students?
- How do students describe some of their experiences at school?
- What influences shape these schooling experiences of students?

Triangulation of data collection includes classroom observations, anecdotal data from student focus groups and informal "structured conversations with students," individual interviews, autobiographical structured writings of students, and archival data. Data analysis includes qualitative inductive methods of constant comparison analysis and content analysis.

The findings generated from this study culminated in developing grounded theory. The data identify a student culture of a lack of empowerment and of oppression that describe a deep incompatibility between the adults (teachers and administrators) and the students. Those characteristics frame a grounded theory of a facilitative environment driven by the specific absence of attitudinal qualities that promote student empowerment. These qualities are individual respect and recognition, acceptance, and increased opportunities for influence in the school. These qualities are shaped by specific schooling experiences of the students, and are influenced by the teacher, administrator, and parent interactions within the school. This grounded, facilitative environment theory is supported by and adds to previous research that specifically addresses

these attitudes.

Methodology

We seek to illuminate the cultural context of an urban high school in order to gain an understanding of the experiences expressed within that context. Therefore, the focus is on the point of view the students, rather than teachers or administrators, because only they are compulsory participants in school. The nature of the perceptual research questions necessitates qualitative ethnographic research using the emic of the students.

Role of researcher

As I (Newbill) began gathering data for this study, I was quite familiar with the school, the faculty, and many of the students through my role as evaluator of the magnet school programs. In that role during the previous two years, my duties primarily were office-based (e.g., analyzing student, parent, and teacher perception questionnaires and quantifying classroom observation data from structured observation forms). By association, this role facilitated my entry into the students' world.

Site and Sample

West Landing High is a Business Technology/Communications magnet "school of choice" to which parents and/or students must apply for placement. There are no requirements for enrollment and any student who submits a complete, timely application is eligible for admittance. At the time of data collection (1992-1993), West Landing High enrolled 865 students, and was unique among the 11 district high schools in enrolling a large proportion of students of varied ethnic backgrounds. The ethnic composition of the student body during the 1992-1993 school year was

about two-thirds African-American, with the remainder being Hispanic, Asian/Pacific Islander, and Caucasian. A slight majority of teachers were Caucasian, with the other near-half being African-American. All administrators and counsellors were African-American.

Additionally, over one-third of the students enrolled at West Landing High lived in the surrounding neighborhood. Census data describe the socioeconomic condition of the neighborhood as: 40% African-Americans and 17% Caucasians below the poverty level; 58% of the total population earning under $20,000/year; over 75% multi-family homes;70% single-parent households; almost 40% newly located households; nearly 25% vacant houses. Finally, school-based data indicate that nearly half of the students were eligible for free or reduced lunch.

Data Collection

Data were gathered using qualitative research procedures involving the triangulation of 20 weeks of observation field notes obtained from all classrooms and teachers; teacher and administrator interviews; anecdotal notes from informal "conversations with a purpose" with students; formal focus groups in which 112 students participated; 68 tenth-grade autobiographical questionnaires which asked students how they viewed themselves, their fears, what made them angry, how they felt about school, their accomplishments, their future, and messages of parental encouragement[1]; and archival data from program evaluation reports

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[1]Responses to the tenth-grade autobiographies are emphasized in this study because almost half of the tenth-grade students at West Landing drop-out after or during the tenth-grade. The sample of students other than African-American (n=53) and Caucasian (n=13) were too few to include in analysis (e.g., two Hispanic, one Vietnamese, and one American

primarily. The interpretation of the data coalesced as building grounded theory.

Data Analysis

Inductive methods of data analysis typically used in qualitative research included constant comparison while engaged in field work and content analysis of focus group interviews and student autobiographies (Marshall and Rossman 1995; Strauss and Corbin 1990). Member checking was used to confirm the researchers understanding of emic data. Observations were persistent and prolonged easing the obtrusiveness of the researcher and ensuring the trustworthiness of the interpretation of observed experiences and events.

West Landing High School - Current Influences

The emic data will be presented as it relates to the development of a grounded theory of a facilitative environment. Integral to the construction is the identification of 'interactive spheres of influence' in the school: the sphere of the students and the sphere of the teachers and administrators. Another, sphere, that of the parents, can be influential as well. However, parental involvement at the school under study was minimal, and this sphere was essentially inactive, if not invisible.

Student Sphere

The identification of the student sphere of influence overwhelmingly identified the category of a lack of student empowerment interrelated with four striking and interrelated characteristics of experiencing: continued

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Indian). Therefore, the information gained from autobiographies was limited since it comprises only African-American and Caucasian tenth-graders.

segregation; emptiness; dissonance between perceptions and experiences by grade level and ethnicity; and a sense of discontent and futility. All five features were found to be signatures of the student sphere.

-Segregation: The data suggest that the students' chose to segregate themselves. Morning congregation patterns indicated that students preferred to socialize with other students who similar to themselves, and consequently, they may have intolerant attitudes toward other races and nationalities. Also, a lack of modeling from the teachers and the teachers' classroom activities fostered attitudes against integration.

-Emptiness: The characteristic of emptiness emerged as a poignant testimony to lack of attendance at school-- at least half of the students were absent some part of every day (Newbill 1993a, 1993b) --and the void between the values students held toward education and the opportunities for education for the students -- a majority of students, especially Hispanic, had a parent, sibling or close friend who had and dropped out of high school (Newbill 1993a, 1993b).

-Dissonance between perception and experience by grade level and ethnicity: Developmentally differential perceptions indicated progression from an illuminating hope for success coupled with a resistant attitude toward work for freshmen moving toward a more disillusioning view of school and its experiences as not meeting students' present and future needs. Student comments during focus groups and responses to autobiographical questions further portrayed how students' positive feelings of schooling were dimmed by the negative experiences. The dissonance between perception and experience seemed to be felt more acutely by the African-American students than the Caucasian students.

-Sense of discontent and a sense of futility: The students at West Landing related experiences in school that made going to school difficult for them (e.g., absence of individual respect and recognition; acceptance; opportunities for influence in the school).

Teacher and Administrator Sphere

In this sphere of influence, the teachers are characterized by a sense of a lack of empowerment, interpersonally with colleagues and professionally with administration and students; marked disunity among the faculty; sense of futility in accomplishments ; and extreme disconnection from the students. The administrator's perceptual field of school is characterized by a sense of threat, being misunderstood, and being isolated.

Parental Sphere

This sphere, identified as an influential and interactive sphere with the other two spheres of influence, is interactive by the very absence of interaction. This sphere is perceived as acutely negative in influence from the teachers/ administrator sphere and highly differentially influential, both positively and negatively, from the student sphere.

Summary of Findings

Several findings suggested from the ethnography of West Landing High School are as follows:

(1) The cultural context of education as identified by three interactive spheres of influence --the students, teachers and administrators, and parents-- with the students being the orienting sphere of this study. These cultures are characterized as varied, adversarial, and oppressive. The extent to which these differing cultures are incompatible is

reflected in a lack of student empowerment.

(2) A major tenet of the emergent theory of a facilitative environment was that the more parallel the alignment between students' values about education and teaching and the actual teaching practices of teachers, the more enthusiastically students engaged in the process of schooling and the more effective the learning.

(3) Student-identified variables related to student empowerment define a facilitative environment theory. Attitudinal conditions which emerged from the data are (a) a sense of personal recognition; (b) respect and appreciation; (c) individual acceptance; (d) an influential collaborative voice in school governance including effective progressive and diverse teaching strategies; (e) and increased interactive opportunities with other students.

Discussion

At West Landing High school, there appeared to be a deep incompatibility between the adult culture, which was collected and organized to reflect the meanings teachers and administrators attach to education, and "kid" culture (Katz 1993) with needs for empowerment, self-expression, individual recognition, and student-centered, social activities at school.

Other researchers and educators have previously indicated from their research similar findings pertinent to theory of a facilitative environment. In fact, these findings date back almost three decades to Aspy and Roebuck (1973, 1977) who began their studies by researching Rogers'(1957) statement of a facilitative environment for therapeutic personality change in the context of education. Furthermore, these studies

were replicated by Tausch and Tausch (1980) with students enrolled in German schools. The findings of these studies indicated a significantly positive correlation between a high level of the facilitative environment and success in learning.

Since the 1980's continued research and models for teacher training have been proposed (Gazda et al. 1995; Purkey and Novak 1996; Rogers 1983). The same facilitative environment identified by Rogers and developed by Truax and Carkhuff (1967) forms the basis for a teacher training model of Gazda and others (1995). Purkey and Novak (1996) use the term "invitational education theory" when referring to a similar facilitative learning environment. Invitational education is guided by the perceptual approach to understanding behavior as is the methodology of this study. This theory is characterized as the following:

> . . . a democratically-oriented, perceptually anchored, self-concept approach to the educative process that centers on five basic principles: (1) People are able, valuable, and responsible and should be treated accordingly; (2) Educating should be a collaborative, cooperative activity; (3) The process is the product in the making; (4) People possess untapped potential in all areas of worthwhile human endeavor; (5) This potential can best be realized by places, policies, programs, and processes specifically designed to invite development and by people who are intentionally inviting with themselves and others personally and professionally (Purkey and Novak 1996:3)

The findings of this study and previous studies suggest a direction toward the adoption and application of an educational theory of facilitative environment. This theory emerged with the tenet of a lack of student

empowerment and the variables of recognition, respect, acceptance, voice, and social opportunity in the student culture of West Landing High. This theory adds to an exhaustive base of research indicating resounding effectiveness in student learning.

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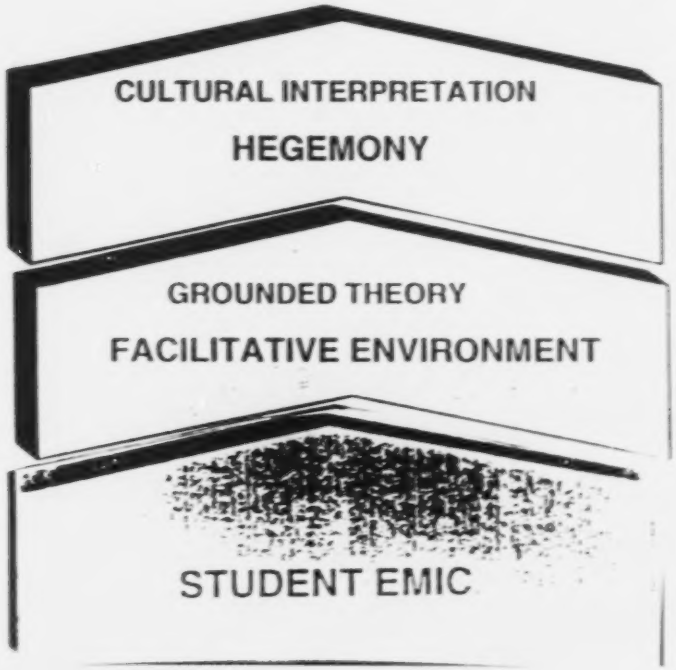

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